

6 Devices for Doing Atmospheric Things

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“Sometimes the shape I’m in won’t let me go.”

Townes Van Zandt

I take this volume to be primarily about the question of “how”: about *how* non-representational theories respond to the call of the worlds in which they find themselves, worlds that oblige, force, or cause thinking to take place in ways that are not always given in advance. As Isabelle Stengers (2005, p. 192) has written, “The ‘how’ is a question which exposes, which puts at risk those who are obliged” to think, because the nature of this obligation, and of the process of its emergence, always remains an open question. For non-representational theories, then, the question of how to think with/in the world—*this* time, on *this* occasion, under *these* circumstances—is never settled in advance, but must be worked out, per-formed, as it were, through a process, as Stengers following Deleuze also puts it, of thinking “par le milieu.” This is also what makes non-representational theories of necessity experimental, albeit in a modest, case-by-case way that will never add up to a general set of approaches or tenets. Non-representational theories are geared instead towards the cultivation of a minor experimental empiricism taking the form of what Alfred North Whitehead calls “novel togetherness” (1978, p. 21).

A useful “tool for thinking” about non-representational theories in this sense is also provided by Stengers—ecology of practices (2005). Stengers’ use of this term relates largely to her thinking about the organization and experience of sciences such as physics, but it can help us think of what it might mean to talk about and foster non-representational theories as sets of ways of going on in the world. Part of any process of thinking about an ecology of practices, as Stengers notes, is the challenge of making present “what causes practitioners to think and feel and act” (*ibid.*, p. 195). On one level, and in the context of this volume, this is a matter of making explicit the forces and circumstances under which certain genres and techniques of non-representational thinking emerge. This is not quite the same as autobiography, but involves a kind multibiographical account—mixing both the



Figure 6.1 (Photo credit: D. McCormack, 2013)

ethnographic and ethological—of the diverse forces and participants that shape matters of collective interest as they register in various habits and bodies. The wider goal here is therefore not simply to produce a form of confessional self-disclosure, nor is it to provide a map of the current state of play of any given set of methodologies. It is, rather, to multiply possibilities for action, to pose the question once again, and again, of what non-representational theories might become. Thus, following Stengers, thinking of non-representational theories via an ecology of practices “may produce also an experimental togetherness among practices, a dynamics of pragmatic learning of what works and how. This is the kind of active, fostering ‘milieu’ that practices need in order to be able to answer challenges and experiment changes, that is to unfold their own force” (ibid., p. 195).

There are many possible ways of contributing to the ongoing elaboration of this ecology and, equally, to respond to the promise of a modest and minor form of experimentalism in which thinking is a process of generating forms of worldly togetherness anew. In this chapter I’d like to think about how attending to the properties and qualities of *things* can be part of the practice and devising of non-representational styles of thinking. More particularly I’d like to dwell upon the possibilities of thinking with, and doing, *atmospheric things*. By atmospheric things I mean sometimes relatively discrete presences with the potential to be grasped as shaped forms, but that emerge from and can also contribute to the generation of diffuse yet palpably affective, atmospheric spacetimes. And I would like to think with the balloon as a device for pursuing a kind of atmospheric fieldwork: that is, a device, by virtue of the cloud of constitutive affective relations in which it is immersed, which participates in the generation of an atmospheric sensing of something happening that can be felt.

SPLITTING DIFFERENCES, LIGHTENING METHOD

First, however, an extended confession, of sorts: I have long thought method too heavy a term to describe the work of non-representational theories. I suspect this has something to do with the way in which method—as an epistemological order-word—is too often loaded with assumptions about the necessity of tethering thought as a precondition for worldly engagement, and too often weighted with claims about the imperative to anchor the apparently airily speculative work of conceptual thinking in the earthiness of the empirical. And it also has something to do with how the stricture of method is often rather too easily invoked, with a chiding tone, as a kind of reminder that theory is something existing above or outside the world, and, moreover, that those who use it need a way of getting back down to that world or getting back into its midst in order to be credible, impactful, relevant. And it has something to do with a sense that it might not be such a bad thing to have one’s head in the clouds, or to dream of rainbows, not

least because clouds and rainbows (see, e.g., Anderson cited in Ward et al., 2011) are very interesting kinds of atmospheric things. So, my reservations about the term non-representational methods stem from the fact that the second part of this term can all too easily be used in a way that qualifies, or grounds, the former as if it were an unearthly deviation from the properly empirical. And my reservations stem from a conviction that we need to find more and better ways of being abstract rather than somehow divesting ourselves of abstraction as a bad habit of thinking.

Perhaps because of these various reasons, like some of the other contributors to this volume I have tended to prefer technique as a way of giving shape and a degree of coherence to the doing of non-representational thinking, although I have by no means been consistent in this. I like the light precision of technique. I like the way it suggests a form of doing that needs to be honed through skillful practice, without necessarily crystallizing as a well-policed set of methodological protocols. And I like the way it is invoked to name both a way of working on the process of thinking and, always simultaneously, on the worldly relations in which thinking participates. Non-representational styles of thought have foregrounded the importance of “techniques of thinking” that open well-formed habits of thinking to the novel possibilities that subsist within the more-or-less than cognitive processes that sustain these habits in order to produce possibilities for thinking anew (Connolly, 2002; Thrift, 2008). This, of course, is nothing especially novel. Rather, it is the resounding of a refrain that has animated the thinking of a range of aesthetic and philosophical traditions, disciplines, and approaches.

Equally, non-representational approaches have sought to practice and perform ways of working (with) worldly relations—relations in which thinking is already entangled—in order to transform or recompose these relations anew (Manning, 2009; Massumi, 2011). In short, although sometimes deploying method as an organizing term in writing and teaching, my inclination has usually tended to be to prefer technique because it seems to better complement the ethos and enactment of non-representational styles of thinking as a kind of “weak theory in an unfinished world” (Stewart, 2008).

I have begun to qualify this inclination, however. And this is because of a certain alluring use of the term method in the thinking of various figures whose work variously overlaps with, inspires, and exemplifies non-representational approaches in a range of ways. So, in Jane Bennett’s work (2010) there is a figuring of method as a way of deliberately modifying critical habits of thinking in the hope this will allow the more-than-human forces abroad in the world, and in ourselves, to more readily participate in the shaping of thinking. Method, in this context, is about turning things around: defamiliarizing them; placing them in generative juxtapositionings that allow thinking to grasp a sense of liveliness of the worlds of things anew, however modestly.

Elsewhere, in Lauren Berlant's (2011) work, the methodological question is one of finding ways of thinking and writing that track the surge and transmission of affective processes via which the singular becomes general. I like the way in which method for Berlant is both a matter of attending to cases or scenes of the ordinary, and where possible, a manner of inventing new *genres* of thinking and writing that make the structuring force of affect in the ordinary more palpable. So, the scene becomes a way of gathering the sense of worlds that matter while also posing the question of how the force of these worlds might become part of their stories. Similarly, a kind of scenographic method informs Kathleen Stewart's (2007) writing about ordinary affects as a series of happenings that might be gathered or collected in the form and genre of a story but can also remain relatively discrete and free—"floating" (see also Fannin et al., 2010). These various invocations of method soften and lighten it somewhat, without necessarily sacrificing the kind of precision required to produce accounts of the world that are palpably empirical. Here, method is less a way of articulating a set of practices that are forced to stand up in a particular epistemological theatre of proof, and more a way of going on in the world that allows its different modes of making difference potentially sensed. Method names an exacting craft, the aim of which is to draw out something of the world that remains vague but still matters. And this craft is no less empirical for being less obviously framed by the epistemological imperatives of the social sciences.

So, my relative positioning on the question of method has begun to shift somewhat. Notwithstanding my initial reservations, it seems to me that the overlaps between technique and method are such that there is not always a clear-cut distinction between the two. Yes, both terms can be used in ways that are variously policing or generative. The injunction to decide on a method or set of methods can be about rehearsing and reinforcing a certain set of epistemological imperatives, but it can also be about attending to things as they happen in a more responsive, risky way. The same applies to technique, albeit perhaps less so. Given this, I am reasonably content here to split the difference by affirming methodological techniques to name a dimension of the work of non-representational thinking.

In truth, although the difference between these two terms is one around which important issues of value and disciplinary boundary-work are at stake, the key question for me is not really which of these terms is preferable. Nor indeed do I think that the key question is which of these terms better names the moment at which the work of non-representational thinking *becomes* empirical. And this is because thinking—and non-representational thinking especially so—is already empirical. One of the distinctive but frequently ignored things about non-representational thinking is that it owns up to the matter of its own empiricism before questions of method ever arise. It does not assume thinking needs to *become* empirical. But it pursues the radically empirical promise that thinking can be and indeed should be empirical in different ways. There is nothing of this world, really, that

the term empirical excludes. There is, of course, something “more-than-empirical”: a necessarily abstract excess named sometimes in terms of the virtual or, in a slightly different tradition, the spectral. In this kind of empiricism, thinking—even conceptual thinking—is never extraempirical. And because of this, the empirical question posed by non-representational theory is not primarily an epistemological problem: the difficulty is not one of *getting at* the world from which we have been alienated, nor one of extracting something from this world. Rather it is an ontological or ontogenetic difficulty: our difficulty is how to be empirical in different ways such that we make more of the worlds in which we move available for thinking—how we draw difference out, how we make it palpable (May, 2005).

The empirical problem posed by non-representational styles of work might therefore be framed as follows: how to devise loosely aligned yet often exacting ways of enacting thinking that involve cultivating attentiveness to the empirical as a field, or fields, of variation, with the important reminder that thinking is already and always a variation in this field. This is a question of finding ways of moving about or within worlds rather than figuring out how to get at them from without. It is less a matter of collecting or extracting something from the world than of making the variations of the world palpable and potentially actionable, and perhaps making variations in the world. It’s about trying to figure out the best way of being with and within the set of circumstances that define, albeit vaguely, the problem that animates thinking. It’s about figuring out if what we are doing, or what we need to be doing, is amplifying, attuning, defamiliarizing, drawing out, following, foregrounding, gathering, holding in place, providing some constraint, tracing and tracking, scattering.

Giving shape to this cluster of ways of doing might involve articulating a series of speculative propositions for research-creation (Manning, 2009, this volume; Sheller, this volume), or it might involve offering a series of injunctions for performative methods (Dewsbury, 2009). Or it might involve presenting a research story in a manner exemplifying something distinctive about non-representational styles of thinking and writing (Vannini, this volume). Another way, and the one I pursue briefly here, is to detail the emergence of a way of thinking with things. And, more specifically, I’d like to detail the emergence of three ways of thinking with and doing atmospheric things as part of the pursuit of non-representational styles of work. And I do so with the balloon as a device for doing atmospheric things.

The term device is chosen deliberately. As Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford (2012) note, device can obviously refer to something instrumental: a technical artifact for articulating some difference between world and thinking. As they also note, the term captures the sense that methodological techniques and whatever they are working with are in some degree mutually constitutive of problems as they emerge for thinking. So, by thinking of things as devices for tracing and participating in the happening of affective space-times, I signal something relatively simple but whose use in different ways

can become part of the enactment of non-representational styles of thinking. At the same time, I want to show how the balloon is a device for making something happen. In the process, thing continues to name both a discrete entity and the processual, relational happening of atmospheric spacetimes that fringe this entity with the sense of difference in the making.

THINGS

At first glance, emphasizing things, and very particular kinds of things at that, might well seem counterintuitive. In certain respects, non-representational theories could be seen to affirm processuality and relationality above all else (see, e.g., Anderson & Wylie, 2009; Latham & McCormack, 2004; Manning, 2009; Thrift, 2008; Whatmore, 2006). Although the welcome effect of this emphasis has been to displace any misplaced sense of the concrete as a touchstone for materiality, for certain strands of thinking interested in the metaphysical status of objects, the upshot is the relegation of objects to second-order phenomena. This, indeed, is a charge levelled by thinkers such as Graham Harman (2008, 2011) against philosophical approaches he claims work to under- or “over-mine” objects by affirming more basic or fundamental forces and processes. To be sure, such claims pose important provocations to some of the strands of philosophical thinking that have influenced non-representational theories. Even then, however, there are certain sympathies between the kind of “alien phenomenology” (Bogost, 2012) developed by Harman and others (e.g., Bryant, 2011), and some varieties of non-representational theories. For instance, like non-representational theories, the speculative realism of object-oriented approaches suggests that there is something of worlds inaccessible to and always excessive of representation. Equally, it is fair to say that there is shared emphasis, expressed in various styles of writing and presenting, on the performative force of different kinds of accounts of the world.

Consider, for instance, lists. In *Alien Phenomenology*, Ian Bogost (2012) suggests that lists are effective techniques for drawing attention to the strange life of non-humans. Lists are valuable because they afford a way of going beyond the conventions of certain kinds of representations by refusing the demand of narrative resolution. More than this, they are reminders that some kind of absolute gap exists between individual items, each of which remains, in the end, “utterly isolated, mutual aliens” (ibid., n.p.). For Bogost, lists emphasize the disjunction of being rather than the relationality or processuality of becoming. So, although for Bogost lists are performative devices for non-representational thinking, they are ultimately non-relational.

Clearly, lists are great at providing a sense of the discrete, the partitioned. Yet although lists separate, they also gather. So, although lists suggest some mutual alienation in the gap between individual items, they can move us to

speculate on what lies between (Bennett, 2001). Equally, whatever skin or membrane it is that surrounds items on a list is not absolutely impermeable. There is always some seepage, some leakage, some emission. The items on a list are not hermetically sealed. They generate an excessive in-between. And whatever lies between the items on a list does not have to be turned once again into another object.

So, although the object-turn offers much, not least in drawing attention to the independent life of non-humans and to their powerful entanglements in diverse spacetimes (see, e.g., Meehan, Shaw, & Marston, 2013; Shaw & Meehan, 2013), I am reluctant to follow the speculative and metaphysical move of those thinkers for whom everything is resolved ultimately into an object, albeit not necessarily an object in the physical, concrete sense. And this is because I am not convinced that accounts of the kinds of spacetimes in which non-representational styles of thinking are interested are necessarily well served by being resolved thus.

Atmospheres are one of these spacetimes. Indeed, in some respects it is in the concept of atmosphere that the distinctive spatiotemporality of non-representational theories has been expressed and elaborated most forcefully (see, e.g., Anderson, 2009; Bissell, 2010; McCormack, 2008; Stewart, 2007, 2011). Atmosphere provides a way of foregrounding the fact that affective spacetimes of variable reach and intensity can be and are felt as forceful gatherings without necessarily being formed. Atmospheres gesture towards the sense of affective excess between and across bodies. Although atmospheres can be grasped as the sense of something happening, I find it difficult and not especially helpful to think of atmospheres as objects. Equally, I am reluctant to think of the relation between an atmosphere and something more discrete as itself resolvable into an object. This may simply be my inability to cast off the associations of the term object, or to embrace a looser sense of the term as something merely available for thought.

My inclination is therefore not to follow the objectifying tendencies of some flavors of this speculative turn while also tactically affirming the value of different degrees of thing-like discretion as part of the craft of thinking and doing non-representational styles of work (see also Ashmore, 2013). My inclination is to work somewhere between a sense of the thing as discrete and diffuse, entity and event. To remain open to tactically affirming the force and power of things is an important way of drawing together and drawing out the relations and associations of which worldly arrangements are composed. As Jane Bennett's (2010) work demonstrates, to attend periodically to something discrete is not to *ground* thinking in objects but to cultivate attention to the properties and qualities of things through selective constraint in a world whose ecologies always contain more than we can imagine. To foreground things, in this sense, is a technique for drawing out forces and relations as part of the elaboration of an ethical sensibility. At same time, I am drawn to the value of thinking of things as the gathering of something diffuse without anything becoming discrete. This

is Kathleen Stewart's (2007, 2011) sense of things: much less discrete, far more atmospheric. Things happening are diffuse yet palpable gatherings of force becoming sensed in scenes of the ordinary. And for Stewart (2011), attunement is a mode of sensing these forceful gatherings as part of the process of writing accounts of ordinary worlds that retain their vagueness while acknowledging the fact they make a difference.

What interests me here is the question of how to find a way of thinking somewhere between the atmospheric as it is grasped as *something happening* (with Stewart) and the kind of selective attention to specific things as part of the elaboration of ecologies of lively matter (with Bennett). What interests me is how to hold together both a sense of atmospheres as diffuse yet palpable spacetimes and the force of relatively discrete presences as they participate in the generation of those spacetimes.

ATMOSPHERIC FIELDWORK

I pursue answers to these questions by thinking with the shaping of things as they move in, generate, and in some sense emerge from the atmospheres in which they are affective participants. Attending to things as a way of telling stories of spacetimes in this way is nothing new, of course: it is a technique used by various scholars interested in producing accounts of the movement and mutability of material artifacts (see Cook, 2004; deSilvey, 2006). Sometimes this is understood in terms of following the thing (Cook, 2004). Following is not quite the name what I am doing here, not least because in a strange way, we need to be able to imagine that things in some sense follow us without the sense of intentionality that this implies. More importantly, the process of thinking with things involves an ongoing emergence of something happening between think and thinking. Equally importantly, the atmospheric things with which I wish to think move somewhere between discrete presences and vague, swirling affects. And, moreover, by atmospheric things I wish to designate something whose affective qualities are also meteorological or, perhaps more precisely, gaseous. I take atmospheric things in this sense to consist of and be composed of different and sometimes turbulent mixtures of elements in different degrees of motion that can be and sometimes are sensed as intensities of feeling (see Ingold, 2006, 2012; McCormack, 2008).

In this context the question is how to find devices for doing atmospheric things in ways that hold open these multiple senses of the atmospheric. The balloon is one such device. For a while now I have been thinking about and with the balloon as a device for exploring atmospheres in both an affective and a gaseous sense (McCormack, 2009). Clearly, using the balloon as a technology for moving through atmospheres is anything but novel. The emergence of balloon flight in the late eighteenth century generated all kinds of reflections by aeronauts on the affective experience of moving through

the atmosphere, experiments that often paralleled efforts to render explicit the physical properties of the atmosphere through measurement devices of various kinds. In an important sense, balloon travel afforded an opportunity for experimenting with atmospheric experience, offering occasions to reflect upon the body's capacity to be affected by this experience as part of the generation of new kinds of elemental geographies (see Martin, 2011). For instance, writing in *Aeronautica, or Sketches Illustrative of the Theory and Practice of Aerostation* (1838), Monck Mason reflected on the experience of being aloft, an aspect of which was the peculiar feeling, or more accurately the absence of feeling, attendant on the stillness that characterized balloon flight. For Mason, understanding this experience, and the "new field of enquiry" of which it was part, required delving into the nature of the body as an array of capacities to sense and be sensed. As he put it,

It is necessary to be observed, that the human body is composed of a variety of different materials, of different specific gravities, and endowed with different degrees of sensibility to pressure, or other disturbing causes, to which they may happen to be subject. When these are set in motion all together, by one and the same impelling force, a very considerable disarrangement of their relative positions must ensue. (1838, p. 119)

The balloon aloft, then, is something that can be used to undertake a form of atmospheric fieldwork in an aerial sense (McCormack, 2010a). Although it shares Mason's interest in the different capacities of different bodies to affect and be affected, the sense of atmospheric fieldwork pursued here differs somewhat, not least because it does not rely solely upon the balloon as a vehicle for travel by humans. Rather, it extends to attentiveness to the various ways in which the presence of the balloon as a simple-shaped thing in ordinary worlds marks the passing of time, the absence of a loved one, the promise of an event. It extends to attentiveness to how the balloon, with or without passengers, has and continues to be used to generate affective atmospheres of all kinds in a range of different contexts: political, scientific, aesthetic. Here my concerns are more constrained, however: I merely sketch, in list form, the outlines of three moments in this atmospheric fieldwork as it has and continues to emerge, and as it might be practiced as part of how non-representational styles of thinking come to take place in relation to a specific set of relations, obligations, and attachments. This sketch is, of necessity, deliberately unfinished.

1. On Sensing Anew¹

For me it didn't begin with the balloon. It began, as it often does, with the question of bringing problems for thinking into being. And it began with something in the world making a difference. It began with the yet-to-be

determined value of a determinate encounter as it generated affects—affects that agitated thinking in a way that continued to resound long after the coordinates of that encounter. It began with the allure of particular combinations of material, image, and text.

That is image I saw in a museum in the late summer of 2005 in Bodø, in northern Norway: the image of a half-deflated balloon on the ice with two figures staring at its collapsing shape. The encounter with that image set me thinking about the affects of disappearance, about what happened, about what remained of the 1897 Andrée balloon expedition to the North Pole. It told the story of how the expedition was a failure in every sense, however, and about how that set me thinking about what failure generates. It documented how, after a few days drifting in various directions, the balloon landed on the ice, and the three members of the expedition eventually perished during their effort to return to Svalbard, from where they had departed.

* * *

Sometimes beginnings cannot be dated and located with anything like this kind of specificity. Sometimes they are about the slow phasing of an interest coming into being. About that nagging, pulling, tugging sense of an emerging happening that has not yet taken shape. About hope borne of feeling that something more might be there. About a kind of circling around a worldly calling forth whose outlines cannot yet and, indeed, might never be discerned. Something fragile, fleeting, sometimes failing. Something unshaped.

So it is about working with this sense of something before it can even be posed as a question, an argument, a line of thought, or a problem. About continuing with that slow thinking through a barely sensed interest that returns again and again, and to which we become obliged. And it's about persisting: persisting in the moving midst of that which is coming into being. This might sound willfully mystical. It's not. It's about the difficult work of sustaining and supporting this emerging sense of something happening in a way that is both rigorous yet open. And it is about shaping: about giving shape to something that can be sensed without necessarily reducing whatever this might become to an object of and for thought.

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It's never about just taking something off the shelf, about rehearsing something that has already been devised. It's about making techniques anew, albeit partially, as part of the emergence of the problem. This is part of what makes non-representational styles of thinking experimental—they are experiments with devising techniques for worldly participation as part of the process of doing research. They are ways of thinking in which the question of how one is to proceed is up for grabs every time thinking begins again. This is not quite the same as claiming that the question is one of

not knowing which of a suite of already available techniques is to be used. Should I talk, draw, photograph, video? These are not really the questions. It is about not knowing in advance what kind of technique will allow you to go on, and not really knowing what the technique will help you do. It is about realizing that the technique that will eventually help you go on, that will allow you enter into a relation with an emerging problem, might not yet have been devised. Perhaps this sounds heroic, setting the bar too high. And perhaps it sounds too dismissive of a repertoire of perfectly workable ways of going on that always have much to offer. The point here is not that you cannot or should not talk to people or take photographs, but that these ways of doing things are generative preludes and supportive supplements to the inventive devising of something else, something that will be distinctive to the problem as it is being drawn out.

With luck—with a lot of luck—this might involve devising a new technique for thinking, a novel way of going on. It is more likely to involve taking a familiar technique from one context and showing how it can do a qualitatively different kind of work in another, and in a way that remakes that technique, or inventively inflects it, or transforms it such that both it and the world in which it is situated are rendered strange. Or, again, this might involve working with a technique germane to a circumstantial context in order to defamiliarize it, to turn it against itself, and in a way that allows you to make some of this context available for thought. It is about working within the terms and techniques of the problem as the conditions from which ways of going on might emerge. Thinking with concepts is always part of this process. For non-representational styles of thinking, concepts are not applied to the world, no more than methods are. Concepts are recreated every time they are thought with. Concepts are put to work in a way that makes a difference to worlds but also, importantly, in a way that reshapes the concept, edging it with other kinds of potential. And we could also say the same about techniques.

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It was about following the aftereffects of the expedition northward, interested neither in adding to the knowledge about the expedition nor in merely rehearsing the story, however gripping the tale. But interested, yes, in what remained of the expedition, in trying to understand of what its afterlife consisted, of what might be made of scattered texts, images, artifacts. But doing so with no name for what was being done. Eventually, however, the expedition itself presented a solution of sorts, in the guise of one of the techniques that provided its organizational rationale: remote sensing. In simple terms, remote sensing is the capture of some kind of data about an object usually from a sensing device at a distant or elevated viewing point. Balloons were the prototypical devices for remote sensing. They allowed the world to be seen from above, map-like. And for the *Andrée* expedition, the intention

was to use a carefully calibrated series of photographs to generate as complete a map of the area overflow as possible.

Facilitated by the balloon as a platform of aerial observation, this kind of remote sensing is a technique for elevated image-capture, distanced apprehension. It is a technique for visual, unearthly abstraction in the worst sense of that term. But it can be modified. It can be reworked to grasp the process through which the affects of what remains are sensed. Unlike remote sensing as airborne survey, this kind of remote sensing is not so much about generating a visual image of some of the qualities or properties of a distant object. Rather, as a technique for non-representational thinking, this modified remote sensing is about cultivating responsive sensitivity to the affects generated by gatherings and scatterings of artifacts and texts (McCormack, 2010b). It is about attentiveness to a multispectral array of affects. To pursue possibilities for remote sensing in this way is about the simple promise of reinventing a technique such that it is put to use in a way that both acknowledges the original intention of the technique while also going beyond that intention.

2. Doing Like a Thing²

For a while I didn't pay enough attention to the thing at the center of the story. It remained a vehicle for thinking of something else, for pursuing other, weightier agendas, heavier lines of thought. But if you are open to them, things have a way of grabbing your intention. And things change when you become responsive to each instance of their appearance. Things change when

- Your eye is drawn to an orange balloon lifting into the mist one morning on Parks Road;
- Your gaze is arrested by the massive, inflated light diffuser suspended above Radcliffe Square in Oxford one misty evening a few years ago as they shot a scene from the film *The Golden Compass*;
- The red balloons showed up in the same square (see figure 6.2). They were tethered to the railings. You stopped to photograph them, wondering what their showing up was all about. You hoped that whatever it was would be worthy of the sense of occasion promised by this strange gathering of familiar things. As things turned out, you were disappointed: the date printed on the note attached to each balloon advertised a series of TED talks in Oxford. But it was the sense of something happening that mattered and persisted;
- You notice how often you buy them on birthdays in order to generate some kind of sense that something is happening.

It is about attending to something again and again, about making a note of every time an example of it is encountered, in what context, and to what



Figure 6.2 (Photo credit: D. McCormack, 2013)

effect, often in the most unremarkable of circumstances. It is about responding to the gently interruptive, intrusive becoming present of the thing as it moves through and generates perturbations (Ash, 2013) that might generate the feeling of atmospheres.

This is not just about going with the flow, secure in knowing that something more is always guaranteed, about the comfort of worldly plenitude from which something else will always show up. It's about a sense that somehow, through repeated, responsive attentiveness, something might take off, take flight—a trajectory, a line of creative variation between things. And it's about maximizing the possibility that this might happen through gathering, assembling, reassembling, arranging, rearranging, juxtaposing. It's about effort: effort perhaps to be active, perhaps to move, but just as likely the effort to be passive, still, responsive, open. It's about generating, in the process, that sense of thought thinking itself: the durational mattering of what Bergson calls an intuitive “impulsion,” which sets thinking “off on a road where it finds both the information it had gathered and other details as well; it develops, analyses itself in terms whose enumeration follows on without limits” (2007, p. 168). It's about how movement and thought think you: about how ideas have you; about how things work you out.

In the process what begins emerging is a way of moving with the qualities and properties of the thing as it affects and is affected by other things and you. Central to this is the realization that verticality is only part of what makes the balloon matter as a generator of spacetimes. True, from the ground, the balloon seems to be all about elevation, about the view from above, about unearthly transcendence and all the problems with which this

is tinged. But as a mobile, moving device, the balloon also poses another important problem: the problem of dirigibility, of finding a way of giving direction. More specifically, it poses the question of how to give something a sense of direction when it is fully immersed in the medium through which it moves. It poses the question of how to inflect the trajectory of something contiguous, coterminous with its atmospheric surround, save for a thin skin of difference. Again, as far as the balloon goes, the realization that the balloon is at one, so to speak, with its atmospheric surround is nothing new. As Mason wrote,

To all intents and purposes [. . .] a balloon freely poised in the atmosphere may be considered as absolutely inclosed or imbedded [sic] in a box of air; so completely so, that (for example) were it possible to distinguish, by tinging it with some particular colour, that portion of the atmosphere immediately surrounding the balloon, and in that guise commit her to the discretion of the elements, she would, apart from all fluctuations in the level of her course, continue to bear the same tinted medium along with her. (1838, p. 132)

For the aeronaut, then, this is about the problem of disagreeing with the medium in which you are immersed in order to generate some variation—how to give yourself over to the wind while also modifying your altitude in a way that allows the balloon to take advantage of winds moving in different directions, at different speeds. This is about devising a mode of what is only ever at best a kind of partial dirigibility. About working within the medium and what it affords, while responding to its obligations.

The leap that might be made here is that what works for balloons might also work for thinking and writing with their capacities and properties. Thinking with the balloon as an atmospheric thing might become a way of giving oneself over to different trajectories of thinking. It might become about giving oneself over to deviations generated by forces and currents beyond any individual body. It might become about cultivating forms of writing that are tensed between the necessity of a partial sense of direction and the impossibility of determining in advance the direction of a movement of thought.

* * *

But thinking cannot only ever be about the ongoing act of release, about lines of wandering. For thinking to take place, there has to be some kind of episodic gathering, in both the material and spatiotemporal sense. Michel Serres has a way of describing this sense of whatever gathers around, whatever surrounds a thing while also, of course, constituting that thing. He calls this circumstance. According to Serres, circumstances have a meteorological, almost atmospheric quality. Serres writes,

Circumstance describes three things superlatively: the imprecise surroundings of subjects, objects or substances, even more remote than accidental, highly unpredictable chance occurrences; a tricky history of stasis and equilibrium, disturbances and returns to the original state, deviations towards the fluctuating environment. Thus the lime tree and its thick foliage, the profound darkness when evening comes, the clouds, wind, weather, the sudden breeze knocking the vase over, the gesticulating of hands and arms between bodies, the pattering of the rain, the voice of someone getting excited, conventional silence. (2008, p. 297)

The circumstances of things are the atmospheric surrounds through which the relations between that thing and whatever it is tinged by are registered. Circumstances are whatever gathers around while also being generative of something that may be prehended as a relatively discrete form. Among other things, a balloon can be understood in this way. It is a shaped form nevertheless fringed by a cloud of solicitations that might generate all kinds of minor deviations in its direction of travel.

* * *

So thinking with the balloon is also about finding a way of writing circumstances as part of the process of affirming the thing as a gathering. It is about cultivating a mode of circumstantial writing that attends to things and the qualities of their halo of solicitations. As far as the balloon is concerned, there are exemplars. The opening pages of Ian McEwan's (1997) novel *Enduring Love*, for instance, exemplify a kind of circumstantial writing, in which there is an account of the sudden appearance of a balloon and of all the other things drawn towards it by the force of its elemental capacities, and an account of the affective variations in which it is a participant. Everything else in that book revolves around the circumstantial qualities of the event. Or, rather differently, consider Donald Barthelme's *The Balloon* (2003): a short story that details the sudden appearance of a large balloon over Manhattan and the range of responses to the thing, responses that never add up to a single narrative.

And so, what the balloon gives is the possibility of a modest form of circumstantial writing: a mode of writing attentive to the different ways in which things make a difference through deviation. This involves attending to and trying to write the particular ways in which this thing participates in atmospheric gatherings of different kinds. It involves cultivating a certain way of moving that takes seriously the qualities of the thinking as an only ever partially dirigible object. It is about learning how to write between the promising problem of dirigibility and the generative constraint of circumstances. It is about thinking about how the properties of how things move might inflect the qualities of the accounts you produce.

* * *

It is about how, after you had received feedback on the first draft of this piece, I took you to a birthday party. As I walked with you there you spotted the yellow balloon tied to the bike, and I took a picture (see Figure 6.1). Your friend, the birthday boy, was three. And he had been given a large, helium-filled, purple balloon in the shape of a three as a kind of floating centerpiece. It had been weighted, but not securely enough. A little later, as you gathered in the garden to eat cake, someone cried out. Something happened. It was about how you all looked up at the three as it floated out of the garden. About how you thought it might not get very far, about how it seemed to hesitate over the trees. And about how you were surprised at how long you were able to track its ascent. About how you lost it momentarily, but how someone else found its shape again: a dot ascending along a perfect diagonal into the distance. And it is about how you wondered where such things end up, eventually: about who or what finds them.

3. Forms of Association³

Where next? Where might this be going? At most what I am offering here is my sense of a loose direction of travel towards the possibility of thinking with things. Jill Bennett (2012) has written that “practical aesthetics is the study of (art as a) means of apprehending the world via sense-based and affective processes—processes that touch bodies intimately and directly but that also underpin the emotions, sentiments and passions of public life” (p. 3). We can think of non-representational styles of work as being concerned with a modified form of practical aesthetics insofar as they are engaged in thinking about and devising modes of sensory and affective apprehensions of the world. Such styles of work have, unsurprisingly, engaged with all kinds of artistic and performance-based practices. And, in doing so, their aim has not been so much to generate a critique of aesthetics, but to produce new collaborative spacetimes of experimental togetherness, new forms of association.

* * *

Simple things can be devices for facilitating this collaboration. And the balloon is one such device. Of course, the balloon and inflatable things more generally have long figured in artistic concerns and practices (Dessauc, 1999; Topham, 2002). But the properties and qualities of the balloon allow it to work as an especially providential device for thinking and working through non-representational spacetimes and for devising modest experiments with the experience of these affective spacetimes—and especially so in relation to atmospheres. The balloon makes atmosphere explicit in a distinctive way, enveloping it but also generating it through its associations. And unsurprisingly, the balloon can and has been employed in quite specific ways as part of the practical aesthetics of apprehending the properties and qualities of atmospheres in both an affective and gaseous sense.

For instance, the balloon offers a device for experimenting with volume. And it does so in a way that shows how the voluminous qualities of atmospheric spacetimes are not reducible to the volumetric. They are also about felt senses of intensity and extent: about a sense of the depth of spacetime, albeit one that is often facilitated by the technical infrastructure of spheres of inhabitation (Sloterdijk, 2011). We can point to a number of reasonably well-known examples of works that use balloons as things to draw attention to the voluminous qualities of atmospheric spacetimes:

- In his work *Half the Air in a Given Space*, first exhibited in 1998, the Scottish artist Martin Creed employs the balloon as a simple device with which to transform architectural spaces. He offers the following instructions: “Choose a space. Calculate the volume of the space. Using air, blow up white 12in balloons until they occupy half the volume of the space. As usual the space should be full of air, but half of it should be inside balloons.” see www.martincreed.com
- In *Scattered Crowd*, first installed in 2002, the Frankfurt-based choreographer William Forsythe suspends hundreds of balloons in a large gallery space “in a billowing wash of sound.” The balloons create an “an air-borne landscape of relationship, of distance, of humans and emptiness, of coalescence and decision.”¹ (see Manning, 2013)
- In 2013 the artist Christo installed *Big Air Package* in the Oberhausen Gasometer, in Germany. Housed inside the former gas storage tank, the sculpture is 90 meters high, 50 meters wide, and consists of 20,350 square meters of semi-transparent polyester fabric with 4,500 meters of rope. It has a volume of 177,000 cubic meters. Entrance is via an airlock, and two fans keep the sculpture inflated.²

Admittedly, these are very brief examples, merely listed here to gesture to the possible ways in which the balloon can function as a device for a form of practical aesthetics in which different qualities of atmospheric spacetimes can be experimented with. In each case the balloon is both a thing in the sense of a discrete presence and a device for doing things, where things are atmospheres sensed in the process of their coming together. In each case the balloon is a device for generating a space of relational experimentation in which to move between the discrete and the diffuse, and in which to hold in tension the different spatial tendencies—scattering and gathering—characteristic of atmospheres (see Anderson, 2009). In each case, the balloon works as what Serres (2008, p. 281) calls an “exchanger”: a device that allows the diffuse to pass into, and give volume to, the circumstantial qualities of the body of the atmospheric thing as a sensing, sensed, feeling, felt actuality. As part of a practical aesthetics oriented towards generating senses of collective belonging and immersion, the affective-material spacetimes of each of these works provide possible sites for experimenting with experience. They point towards possible ways of enacting a form

of atmospheric fieldwork through the production of modest spacetimes of novel togetherness.

* * *

I want to do more than point, however, but have not yet had the chance: so, when I had eight thousand or so words of this piece written I drove you all the way from Oxford to West Bromwich, to the soon to be closed “Public”³: a flagship arts center and gallery. I had promised you some fun. There would be balloons, supplied by Martin Creed. And you could play in a room full of them, or so I thought. But you were disappointed—not because there were no balloons. They were there: beautiful, warm, orange, taking up half the air in the given space. But they were housed behind bars, or cables (see Figure 6.3). You tried to reach inside to touch them. But they remained at a distance. This is not what you had come for: this was not the experimental cloud of empirical associations in which you had hoped to move.

You played instead with the interactive galleries: with Telepresent Embrace, Flypad, Animo, Sound Canvas. And you loved the Public so much that you told me you wished you lived in West Bromwich. I told you we would never come here again, because the Public was closing, probably forever. This space, its possibilities, its promises, would disappear. Its vague, sensory atmospheric were simply too much to sustain, unaffordable.

POP

I had promised you this trip in part because when I had written 7,302 words of an earlier version of this chapter, you presented me with two uninflated

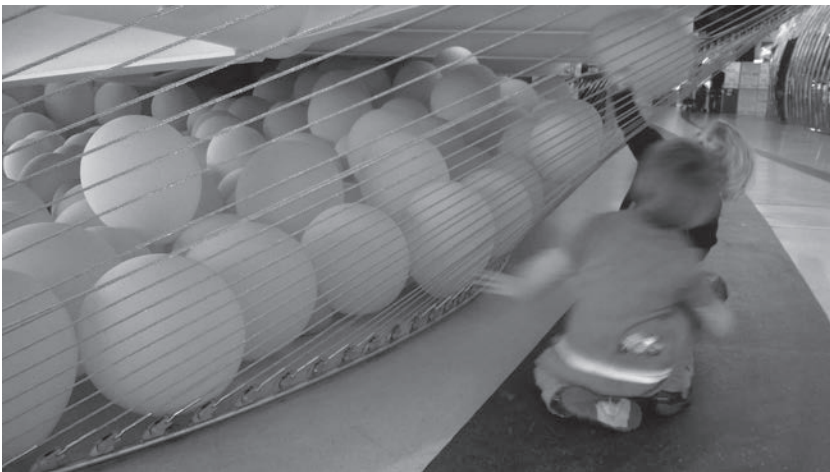


Figure 6.3 (Photo credit: D. McCormack, 2013)

balloons in the kitchen. Birthday leftovers rummaged. One red. One yellow. The refrain of favorite colors. Blow them up. Please! Please! Please! Red first. Then yellow. You threw them around the room. You played with the difficulty of grasping something so light, with the ease of keeping things aloft.

And then the explosive affects of the larger one popping into nothing but a yellow shred. You were inconsolable at the sudden loss, about the finality of the disappearance of the thing. I had given it too much air, perhaps. I had over inflated it. I told you I would blow up another if you took care of it. And you have.

* * *

As a device with which to think, the balloon provides a way of holding together a sense of the tension between the diffuse and the discrete. As a device with which to move, it provides a way of holding on to the tension between the directional and the circumstantial. As a device for practical aesthetics, it provides a way of generating spacetimes for experimenting with the experience of atmospheres. The balloon is only one device, of course, and is by no means privileged. There may be any number of devices for doing atmospheric things. For instance, as James Ash (2013) has written, the screen offers another particularly important interface at and through which to explore and experiment with atmospheres as affective spacetimes. As part of the ongoing elaboration of ecologies of non-representational practices, experiments with such things might provide a way of foregrounding how atmospheres become matters of concern for a range of techniques and technologies for generating aesthetic, political, cultural, and economic value.

But I'd prefer not to end by sounding like I thought I knew where this kind of fieldwork might be going. This chapter is not a series of object lessons, and that's because not everything of the world in which non-representational theories are immersed is an object. Or more precisely, something of these worlds is sometimes always more or less than an object. Serres writes that a "cloud is a cloud, it is not solely an object. A river is not just an object, neither is an island nor a lake. Likewise the noise of the sea" (1995, p. 112). And likewise the sense of an atmosphere: of a soft day, of a close day, of things pressing in, of something moving in the wind, of the presence of those red and yellow balloons in the corner of the room, presence that continues to diminish day by day as I draw this to a close. And I wonder why it is we always leave them to shrink. We never pop.

I'd prefer to end, unfinished, by returning to a sense of the "how." To the problem and promise of "how" to make explicit the processes by which things and their spacetimes oblige us to think: how they oblige us to think with and within them in a series of ways that may not have been clear from the outset and that might still be emerging. To the "how" of things that can

be sensed as discrete presences but that don't always need to be turned into objects. The atmospheric things that figure here: those sometimes shaped forms whose apparently discrete presence draws our attention to the relations of which they are composed. Those things always fringed, and in some sense constituted by, the atmospheric processes and relations in which they participate. Those things "immersed in a turbulent cloud of solicitations that we'd have to call meteorological" (Serres, 2008, p. 299). Those things that in all sorts of ways, gentle or violent, oblige us to think again, anew.

NOTES

1. See www.williamforsythe.de/installations.html?no_cache=1&detail=1&uid=22.
2. See www.gasometer.de/en/exhibitions/current-exhibition.
3. See www.thepublic.com/exhibitions/martin-creed. Designed by architect Will Alsop, the Public is a publicly funded gallery, art, and education space that at the time of writing was scheduled to close by the end of November 2013.

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